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Deconstructing Critical Vocabulary

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'Let us go beneath the surface at our peril.'

—*Oscar Wilde*

Literary prejudices die hard. Original works continue to be neglected while mediocre authors shoot into fame on the wings of publicity. Besides, too often works are vicariously tasted through reviews. Ah, 'there's the rub!' The reviewer's bias tends to predispose the reader's mind, favourably or allergically, towards a particular text or author and thus affects the impartiality of his judgment. This is true of Oscar Wilde who is generally rated as a notorious poseur having no originality whatsoever as a critic. Arthur Symons once ironically alleged that Wilde 'is always original in his quotations' (Beckson 96) and J.M. Whistler detected in him 'the courage of the opinions—of others' (*SL* 66). Such depreciatory remarks make us idle about reinvestigation of Wilde's standing as a theorist. We continue to overlook the clever verbal manipulations which have made Wilde's critical theories so formidably elusive. The aim of this article is to analyse the crypticism inherent in Wildean critical postulates in order to establish that Wilde's observations deserve more than a mere cursory glance.

As a resolute crusader against literary didacticism Wilde provocatively claims that 'all art is immoral' (*CW* 1039). The wording is so offensive that even those who dislike art with a palpable design cannot project Wilde as their spokesman. But this seemingly antinomian proposition does make sense if

only we properly contextualise the utterance and try to get at the import of the word 'immoral' here. In a closely following relevant passage of the essay Wilde notes that all art is 'immoral, except those baser forms of sensual and didactic art that seek to excite to action of evil or of good' (*CW* 1042). The preposition 'except' indicates that, according to Wilde, 'sensual' works which pervert our mind, are as 'moral' as 'didactic' works which instruct us in the name of entertainment. Like Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Wilde maintains that aesthetic emotion is exclusively 'static,' as distinct from 'kinetic,' because it arrests our mind and raises it above desire or loathing (Deane 222). He holds that art exists in a moral vacuum. It is neither corruptive nor educative but literally *apodidactic* or morally indifferent. So when he describes all art as 'immoral,' he uses the term in the neutral sense of 'a-moral.' Without proper orientation to the curiously subjective flavour of his phrasing, we cannot understand why he reproves the artist for his moral leanings or why he dismisses an ethical sympathy in 'an artist as an unpardonable mannerism of style' (*CW* 17). 'Sympathy' (etymologically 'syn,' together, *plus* 'pathos,' feeling) here does not carry the general sense of 'mutual affection' or a shared feeling. Presumably Wilde has used it in the pejorative sense of 'irrational preference' (*OED* definition 3d). Incidentally, this was the most current sense of the word in the 19th century, as evident from the citations in *OED*. The dates of all the five instances range between 1823 and 1893.

Oscar Wilde is consistently wayward in his choice of critical diction. For example, in 'The Critic as Artist' he uses a strangely evasive language to register his disagreement with Matthew Arnold on the issue of what should be the 'primary aim' of a critic. Arnold defines the critical effort as an endeavour 'to see the object as in itself it really is' (Super 258). Repudiating this view, Wilde claims that the aim of the critic is 'to see the object as in itself it really is *not*' (*CW* 1030). However confusing at first glance, this is but a trickily indirect way of stating that criticism is exclusively subjective; it gives prominence to the point of view of the perceiving self and is hardly an impartial

transcription of external realities. The same penchant for periphrasis is found in Wilde's contention that, not only criticism, even dramatic literature is not impersonal. He argues that the characters in a play are, strictly speaking, 'simply the poets themselves, not as they thought they were, but *as they thought they were not*' (*CW* 1045). The dismissal of artistic objectivity as mere illusion is not altogether unjustified, since no one can really cross his/her shadow, that is, reach out of his/her self-*except in thought*. But the way it has been articulated baffles our understanding and shocks us into disagreement.

Too often Wilde jerks his expression to make it catchy. While justifying creative criticism, he teasingly describes it as 'the only civilized from of autobiography' (*CW* 1027). It is quite natural that as a disciple of Pater, Wilde would be a staunch supporter of impressionistic criticism. But to call it 'autobiography' is to allow arbitrary misreading in which the critic refuses to locate in the text the rational sources of his impression. However, Wilde is not critically so shallow as to encourage this type of wanton self-indulgence. In his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he makes a prudent reservation in this regard: 'The highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a form of autobiography' (*CW* 17). Admittedly, his critical insight is clear enough. Only his phrasing is shockingly defamiliarised. Unless we get attuned to Wilde's own mode of verbalising an idea, we cannot follow why he thinks that to criticise is 'to realize the non-existent' (*CW* 1028). Though the dictionary defines 'non-existent' as 'having no existence', Wilde employs the phrase to mean 'having no surface existence.' What he really implies is that the critic must reveal feelings heretofore unexplored by any. After all, the feeling traced in a work by a perceptive mind might have been unperceived before but it cannot afford to be unperceivable.

Linguistic obliquity is the distinctive feature of the critical writings of Oscar Wilde. He often strains our semantic expectation by ingeniously playing upon the etymon. In 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' he hails T.G. Wainewright as an 'artificial' poisoner (*CW* 1002). The epithet has been chosen not because

Wainewright's manners were 'affected' or 'lacking in spontaneity' but because his mind and taste were 'refined by art.' Evidently, the term 'artificial' has purposely been used in the etymological sense, 'improved through the touch of art' ('ars,' art, *plus* 'facere,' to make). Like many of his contemporaries, Wilde fulminates against the utilitarian view on art as an 'outmoded luxury trade' (Abrams 326). Taking his cue from Gautier who, in the Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), argues that absence of practical utility is a precondition for aesthetic excellence,[1] Wilde affirms: 'All art is quite useless' (*CW* 17). It is to be noted that here the term 'useless' has not been used in the well-known sense of 'having no use or worth.' It denotes 'use-free,' that is, aloof from utilitarian concerns. This is clear from the immediately preceding sentence where Wilde compartmentalises the beautiful and the useful: 'The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely' (*CW* 17). Indeed, Wilde's expressions are so devious that decoding their purport often proves too challenging. The captions chosen for the two parts of his essay 'The Critic as Artist'—namely 'With some remarks upon the importance of doing nothing' and 'With some remarks upon the importance of discussing everything'—bear out the point. Without going through the battery of Arnold-baiting logic about the supremacy of criticism over creation, it is almost impossible to see that 'doing' and 'discussing' are the Wildean neologism respectively for aesthetic creation and literary criticism.

In his essays, Wilde often wrenches expressions almost at the expense of intelligibility. The very title of his most illuminating essay, 'The Decay of Lying,' best illustrates such Sphinx-like riddlesome wording. The essay criticises the naturalistic bias in contemporary art and vindicates the exalting power of the creative imagination. Absurd though it may strike us, Wilde here faults 'the morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-felling' (*CW* 973) in realistic works and bewails the attenuation of 'lying' in contemporary literature. Not that Wilde wishes art to be misrepresentation.[2] Nevertheless, by mourning the decline of 'lying' in art, he actually deplores the

imaginative constipation in naturalistic artefacts. So 'lying' in the context of the essay connotes that force of the imagination minus which works of art inevitably get atrophied. They become, in Wilde's phrasing, 'so life-like that no one can possibly believe in their probability' (*CW* 973). To wit, they become naturalistic at the expense of probability, the ultimate touchstone of art. Another brow-raising prevarication—one that makes us sceptical about Wilde's critical sanity—is: 'Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life' (*CW* 982). This theory about life holding the mirror to art is but 'a paradoxical formula for the influence of art on life' (Wellek 411). Prof. Wellek's reading is right, since within a few lines 'imitation' occurs again as a synonym for 'influence': 'Nature, no less than life, is an imitation of Art' (*CW* 985). What Wilde intends by this crazy formulation is that Nature, a projection of our psyche,[3] owes her 'unique effect' to art. This is because aesthetic charm mostly depends on our attitude which art can shape, modify and improve. Prof. Ellmann has correctly poi d out that the conventional meaning of words muddies the point of view of Wilde and makes his thought almost impenetrable (Ellmann xxii).

Audacious violation of semantic convention is a property of literary language, not assuredly the language of criticism. Yet Wilde has couched his ideas in a diction that consciously dodges easy grasp. Why Wilde problematises communication is anybody's guess. In his critical essays he relinquishes the analytical language of criticism in favour of the innovative vocabulary of literature most probably to demonstrate the creativity of criticism.[4] The verbal slipperiness might as well have been inspired by Wilde's Emersonian dream that 'to be great is to be misunderstood' (*CW* 1016).[5] Strangely enough, this curious idiolect has not yet been satisfactorily demystified. It's a pity that the rehabilitation of Wilde's stature as a critic is long overdue.

NOTES

1. Gautier sarcastically observes: 'Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly [...] the most useful place in a house is the lavatory' (Richardson 39).

2. Lying for gaining some immediate personal mileage, what Wilde mischievously calls 'lying with a moral purpose,' is 'misrepresentation.' It is genetically different from poetic lying 'which is its own evidence' and 'for its own sake' (*CW* 990).
3. The solipsistic premise has been best articulated by Coleridge in 'Dejection: An Ode:'

> O Lady! we receive but what we give
> And in our life alone does Nature live. (11.47-48)

4. Wilde refuses to distinguish between literary criticism and critical theory which always overlap in his essays.
5. 'Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood,' observes Emerson in 'Self-Reliance' (Edel 296).

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